

## Keeps Suspicions Away

by Papergirl

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Summary: This is my sequel to 'An Explosion a Day...'. It's an Early Edition/The X-Files/Quantum Leap/JAG/Sliders/Seven Days crossover

## Keeps Suspicions Away

title: ... Keeps Suspicions Away author: Amber Donahue > <meta name="GENERATOR">

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\*\*if you want to jump right into the story, skip the notes. These notes are for those of you who like putting toes in the water to test it out first, or would just like to know what you're getting into. :-)

AUTHOR'S NOTE : Hi! This is another multiple show crossover story. This time it's The X-Files/Quantum Leap/Early Edition/JAG/Sliders/Seven Days, with a small cameo appearance by ER. Okay, so people read my story, 'An Explosion a Day.....' and everyone that gave me feedback loved it, even those who have never watched any of the shows. I took that as a good sign g and I was happy. Then some people said that it was so good that I should write a sequel to it. And then I wasn't so happy. I had to think of another way to get all three sets of characters involved. But I got happy again because I solved this dilemma by adding another show into my crossover (JAG) and yet another (Sliders), and even another (Seven Days), along with a character of my own creation, which seemed at first to complicate things, but I think it might have made it a bit easier. Of course, keeping the characters and plot straight is quite another story (tee he). Actually, it's THIS story. I hope you like it. It is called "... Keeps Suspicions Away".

DISCLAIMERS : I don't wanna be sued, or fined, or locked up, so here I go. I'm not taking any credit for the characters or shows anyway, but some people might not know that so - The X-Files, Fox Mulder, Dana Scully, Walter Skinner, and any other X-Files characters I use

are property of Chris Carter - Quantum Leap, Sam Beckett, and Al Calavicci are property of Donald P. Bellisarius, as is JAG, Harmon 'Harm' Rabb, Jr., Sarah 'Mac' Mackenzie, Admiral Albert Jethro "A.J." Chegwidden, and Bud, Harriet, and A.J. Roberts - Early Edition, Gary Hobson, Marissa Clark, Chuck Fishman, and the cat, are property of Bob Brush and others - Sliders, Quinn Mallory, Wade Wells, Professor Maximilian Arturo, Rembrandt Brown, and the idea of sliding belong to Tracy Torme and others - Seven Days, Frank Parker, Olga Vokavich, Dr. Ballard, Nate Ramsey, Isaac Mentnor, the Sphere, and Operation Backstep all belong to \_\_\_\_\_. Except for a quick cameo appearance by Dr. Carter from ER, the other characters I throw in are, in fact, created by me and my "splendiferous" imagination. If I do through in one you recognize though, to quote Bart Simpson, "I didn't do it". Hopefully, that's it. I would just like to thank all these people in creating such great characters and letting people like me be able to use them for our own intents and purposes. hehe.

SETTING: This story takes place almost a year after "An Explosion a Day..." and before the professor was shot and killed on Sliders, after everyone on JAG went to Australia and Brumby proposed to Mac, before the burning of the office and syndicate on The X-Files, before Quantum Leap went off the air (possibly a season finale for that show), before they got rid of Chuck on Early Edition, and anytime recently on Seven Days. I know these contradict each other, but you've entered MY universe now evil, maniacal laughter

FEEDBACK: Feedback. What a great word. Everyone should have feedback, and yet many innocent, hard-working obsessive authors are starving. For only possibly 30 seconds of your life, you could write to contribute to the Feedback for Authors Society (FAS) and write an e-mail to an author. There are no long term commitments! Just click and type and send. Your e-mail could feed a starving author for months....Okay, enough with the corny infomercial. Feedback, as always, is welcomed with a red carpet and opened arms @ Friendoholic11@yahoo.com. Thanks! And, just for your information, my friend Akira really enjoyed my FAS commercial and has created a real Feedback for Authors Society at <http://www.eternaldragon.com>.

ARCHIVE: Anywhere, just please let me know... I like to tell my friends to go read my stories. ;-)

SPOILERS: A whole bunch, thank you. g Pretty much anything that happened in the period determined in my SETTING note is fair game.

YES, ANOTHER NOTE: At the beginning, for JAG, the time is showed in ZULU. To convert times, just if you want to know, subtract 5 hours for Washington, D.C., 6 for Chicago, and 4 for San Diego, and convert from military time. Let me just say, it took me a while to understand this ;-)

AUTHOR'S LAST NOTE: I just want to say that I took "writer's license" (poets have one, so authors should, too) with certain things. I have never been to California (though I want to go someday) and I haven't seen or been on a naval ship in real life, etc.

AUTHOR'S LAST NOTE, I PROMISE: Seeing this is my sequel to "An Explosion a Day...", it would probably make more sense to read that

before this, but it's not 100% necessary to do so in order to understand this one. The stuff you need to know you'll pretty much pick up.

OKAY, WAIT, ONE LAST NOTE: In case some of you think I lost my mind or left out a crossover show - I didn't (well, not in this story). The "super-great" character of Charity (Charlie) Schweitzer is my own creation... well, Leah helped me out on that (giving me the first name and all), but still... Anyways, she's mine in this story. If you want to borrow her, just let me know. I'll be delighted. I may even pass it on to Leah.

ONE MORE THING BEFORE I FORGET: If this story was to become a TV movie or something, Kyle Chandler would play the parts of Gary Hobson and Kyle Schweitzer because the characters are supposed to look practically identical. Hopefully, now that you know that, that part will make a little more sense.

SO I LIED, ONE MORE NOTE - PLEASE FORGIVE ME: The title of this story goes with the title of the first one : An Explosion a Day Keeps Suspicions Away, but there's not really a reason. I'm not even sure it makes sense. I just liked that.

Whew. Are you still with me? Yes? That's great!

And on with the story.....

TITLE: ... Keeps Suspicions Away

AUTHOR: Amber Donahue

PARALLEL EARTH #389045

A PARK IN SAN FRANCISCO

DATE UNKNOWN, 4:23 P.M.

"When do we slide, Q-Ball?" Rembrandt Brown asked as the group of four travelers walked through the scenic park as the sky clouded up.

"One minute, 42 seconds, Cryin' Man," Quinn Mallory answered, and shoved the timer into his pants pocket. The timer, their ticket to traveling through parallel dimensions, looked like nothing more than a bulky cell phone.

"What do you say we go and enjoy some cold glasses of lemonade, huh? I assume the treasury is still in good health, Mr. Brown?" Professor Maximilian Arturo asked as they spotted a children's lemonade stand up ahead.

"Ah, of course it is, Professor. All that dish washing Wade and I had to do on the last world gave us a healthy bundle."

"Yeah, the next time we run low, it's your turn to do the dirty work," the petite Wade Wells said, pointing a finger at Quinn and the Professor.

"Yes, yes," the Professor's hearty laugh boomed through the park.

"Don't worry, Wade. We'll do our share, right, Professor?" Quinn said, knowing full well that he and his former teacher had skipped out on chores plenty of times.

"Joke, joke, if you must," Wade said, pushing her short red hair behind her ears, "But we will make you do your part, and if you don't, you'll owe us big when we get home."

"Yeah, you'll become our very own personal slaves," Rembrandt joked as Quinn ordered four glasses.

Once they had paid for their refreshments, Quinn checked the timer again. The gadget told him they had twenty-two seconds left on this world. When he informed the group, Rembrandt sighed.

"Ah, it was nice to get away. This seemed like a peaceful slide. No monsters to kill, no murderers to chase..."

"I'd have to agree," the large Professor spoke up. "But you know the rule: If this slide was so nice, the next one's gonna be hell."

As he spoke, Quinn used the timer to open the wormhole that led between the different dimensions. As they all jumped through, they had no clue how right the Professor really was.

McGINTY'S RESTAURANT

CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

MAY 7, 9:23 A.M.

"Let me come with, Gare. I promise I won't do you any harm. I've got some frequent flier miles that I have to get rid of, and I have nowhere else to go."

Gary Hobson took a long sip of his coffee.

"But the last time we went to D.C., you told me for two weeks how much it stunk."

"Well, that's because it was hot and muggy and we were there to stop a damn bomber! I'm sure I'll enjoy our nation's capital a little more if, while you're stopping this shooting in a warehouse, I am strolling along Pennsylvania Avenue, buying postcards and snapping pictures."

"No, this is strictly business."

"Aw, c'mon, Gare! There's so many sights to see,"

"So many things to bet on," Gary interpreted.

Marissa laughed.

"What's so funny?" Chuck asked her. Her guide dog, Spike, barked.

"What about McGinty's?" Gary asked pointedly. It had only been a couple months since Gary had purchased the restaurant. Now Gary was

the silent partner, and Chuck was running everything, along with Marissa's help. Chuck just shrugged off the question.

"I need a vacation," he said simply. "Marissa can handle things, right?"

Marissa was surprised at this statement.

"I-uh... Well, I mean... I might be..." her voice trailed off.

"Exactly," Chuck said.

Gary sneezed suddenly.

"Bless you," Marissa and Chuck said in unison.

"Anyway, I think I know why you want to go back there so badly, Chuck."

"Why?" Gary asked her curiously.

"What was the name of that female agent that that Krycek guy knocked out while you were in the garage?"

"Dana Scully," Chuck informed her.

"Exactly," Marissa replied, and Gary looked at Chuck.

"If you don't come with, will you ever shut up about it?"

"No," Chuck answered truthfully.

"Well, then. I have no choice, do I? The shooting's tomorrow night, Chuck. The flight's at six-thirty tonight. Can you get a ticket and be packed by then?"

"You bet."

"Wanna come, Marissa?" Gary asked. She shook her head.

"Nope, can't. I got a big exam to study for. Plus, I've got McGinty's to run now, huh? You're gonna help me, right, Spike?"

The big German Shepherd barked in agreement.

"Okay, then," Gary took another sip of his drink.

"Well, I'm going home. I got a lot of packing to do," Chuck said, sliding out of the booth.

"Pick you up, Gare?"

Gary nodded, and Chuck raced outside, causing the bell to ring as the door closed behind him.

Gary sighed.

"That's gonna be some trip," Marissa commented.

"You have no idea," Gary said, and even though his memory of his and Chuck's last trip to D.C. was vague, he still knew that it had been... well, difficult, and this trip would be no different.

"Maybe I should try calling the DC police again," Gary pondered out loud.

"Good idea, Gary."

A few minutes later, Gary hung up the phone. "I don't think it worked," he said dejectedly.

"Well, you never know," Marissa assured optimistically.

Gary glanced down at the paper and let out a breath, noticing that the warehouse shooting headline had changed to something just as tragic, but a lot closer to home.

"I guess you were right, Marissa. I hope Chuck didn't have his mind set on DC too much. Tell him I'm sorry, and I should be back soon."

"Why? What happened? What does the paper say now?"

"Well, the headline changed," Gary informed her, slipping on a jacket. "I have to go stop a shooting three blocks down."

"Wait, Gary -"

"What?" he asked from the door.

"I need your wallet if I'm supposed to call in all the orders today."

Gary fished in his pocket as he walked back over to Marissa. "Here you go."

"Thanks. Oh, and good luck, Gary!"

"Thanks, Marissa."

1426 ZULU

WASHINGTON, D.C.

THURSDAY, MAY 18

Commander Harmon Rabb, Jr. blinked slowly. He was sitting at his desk, staring at the screen saver on his computer but not seeing it. What he was really seeing was the scene at the airport in Australia. The whole thing was playing itself over and over in his mind, non-stop. He hadn't been able to sleep for days. A thousand images bombarded his poor, sleep-deprived brain, the dominant one being the kiss Brumby and Mac had shared at the airport.

'I'm such a fool,' Harm chastised himself. 'I waited too long. I was too chicken. There were hundreds of times to make a move, to tell her. I just couldn't do it. And now? Now it's too late.'

He sat up suddenly. 'It's not too late!' a voice cried out in his

head.

Could he really bring himself to tell Mac how he felt? Of course he could. He had loved her for a long time, had realized it a while ago, too. He just hadn't acted on it. All he had to do was say the words. It's not like he could make things worse - he hadn't talked to Mac in the week since they had returned. On the plane he had switched with Bud for the window seat and had feigned sleep while listening to Mac and Bud talk. He had been praying both for them to discuss The Ring and for them to stay away from the topic completely.

What if he didn't say anything? What if he just sat back and watched Mac say 'yes', watch her and Brumby plan everything out, attend the wedding? What if he chickened out forever?

His thoughts briefly drifted back to Lt. Meg Austin. He hadn't acted on his love for her until it was too late. And now... he couldn't even remember the last time he saw her.

With Mac, it would be better if she moved to Australia. He didn't think he could stand seeing her every day at work, talking about Him, smiling her pretty smile, being happy and in love. He would have to move if she didn't.

Harm stood up decisively. He couldn't sit back, he couldn't allow Mac to slip away from him like Meg had. He had to take action. He had to tell her.

He walked out into the busy bullpen and stood in front of Mac's office. The door was open and he quietly knocked on the frame.

Mac looked up from her paperwork and Harm watched her scrutinize him.

"Hey, Harm." she paused, searching her desktop for a file folder. "Do you need the Johnson file?"

'Be cool, Harm. Be brave,' he told himself.

"No, no I - well, yeah, yes I do, but... but that, that wasn't what I wanted to talk to you about," Harm stuttered, cringing inside.

"Okay," Mac shifted in her seat, placing the folder back on a pile. "Do you want to sit?"

Harm shook his head, swallowing hard. He was starting to lose his confidence. What if she laughed at him? Worse, what if she told him she had already accepted Brumby's offer? The whole office would laugh at him, and he might even cry.

No, he couldn't lose face like that... but what if she didn't laugh at him? She wouldn't, he assured himself. She knew how hard it was for him to express his feelings. And after all, she had said some interesting things on the ferry...

"Harm? Are you okay?"

He snapped out of it and looked at Mac. His partner, his best friend.

"Mac," he started. Then he changed his mind. "Sarah, I just wanted to tell you..." he trailed off as he caught sight of the ring on her hand. It shone, reflecting the halogen light into his eyes, into his heart, and stabbed it. The ring was on her left hand.

He backed up unconsciously and turned to leave. He mumbled either an apology or a congratulation, but Mac couldn't hear him, and practically ran out of the room, right into the Gunny.

"Commander, are you okay?"

"Oh yeah, I'm fine, Gunny," Harm lied easily.

"Good. I was looking for you and the Colonel. The Admiral wants to see both of you in his office, ASAP."

"Thank you, Gunny," Harm managed to say, and hurried off to the Admiral's office. He didn't want to face Mac again. She was probably confused out of her mind. He had made a complete fool out of himself.

Tiner told him to go in and Harm entered the Admiral's office, feeling worse than he could remember feeling in a long time.

"Where's the Colonel?" Admiral Chegwidden asked as Harm snapped to attention.

"She should be on her way, sir," Harm answered, not meeting the Admiral's intense gaze.

"Good. I have a fresh assignment for you two. And where is Lt. Roberts today?"

"I believe he is home sick today, sir. Will he be helping the investigation?"

"Yes. You're going to be defending some civilians in a... well, a rather strange case. You could probably use Lt. Roberts' help on this one."

"Sir?" Harm asked as Mac entered.

"Colonel Mackenzie reporting as ordered, sir," Mac announced, snapping to attention next to Harm. His whole body tensed at her arrival. Mac didn't seem to notice, but the Admiral did.

"At ease, Colonel. I was just telling Commander Rabb about your new assignment. You will be doing a joint investigation with the FBI."

"The Bureau? Why do they have jurisdiction?" Harm asked curiously.

"Well, it's a touchy subject, seeing how the defendants are civilians, but SecNav and the Director think it is in the best interest of the United States to get this matter straightened out immediately. Your plane leaves at sixteen-hundred."



Mac glanced over at Harm, but he continued to stare straight ahead.

"Here's all the information on the case," Chegwiddden announced, handing a file to Harm. "I expect you to go over it on the plane. Dismissed."

"Aye, aye, sir," Harm and Mac said simultaneously, and spun around to leave. Harm held the door open for Mac without glancing at her.

"Commander? May I see you for a second?" AJ asked, and Harm spun back around and approached his desk.

"Yes, sir?" Harm asked, trying to focus on the situation in front of him.

"Are you okay, Harm?"

The Commander looked surprised.

"I'm fine, sir," he answered after a moment.

"Really? You don't look it," AJ paused. "Everything alright with the Colonel?"

Harm nodded in the affirmative.

"Yes, sir. Everything is fine."

AJ started pacing. 'Yeah, right' he thought. 'You're a big fat liar, Commander.' Out loud, he said, "Very well. It better be. I need both of you focused solely on the task at hand - there's a lot of pressure from the White House and Capitol Hill on this case."

"I didn't know it was so high profile, Admiral," Harm said, glad for the change in subject.

"It is. Now go home and pack, Commander."

"Yes, sir," he turned to leave.

"Oh, and one more thing to keep in mind, Harm," he paused. "Sometimes we forget that left and right are reversed when we look at someone head on. Dismissed."

Harm continued on his way without looking back and acknowledging the Admiral's statement, but he couldn't help a sigh of relief from escaping his lips as he left the office. How could he have been so foolish?

"Oh my," said the Admiral, sinking into his chair. He smiled faintly - it was just a matter of time. "I wonder what the office pool is up to now?"

J. EDGAR HOOVER BUILDING

WASHINGTON, D.C.

MAY 18, 12:39 P.M.

"What is it now, Mulder?" Dana Scully asked, not looking up from the report she was typing on the computer in front of her as her partner entered their cluttered basement office.

FBI Special Agent Fox Mulder tossed a folder labeled "X1182217" on his partner's lap and leaned against the wall across from the desk she was sitting at. She looked up at him across her new desk.

"Read it, Scully," he said, almost grinning, and watched her as she carefully opened the file.

He grinned when her eyebrows raised.

"What exactly is this, Mulder?"

"Another X File, Scully."

"I could tell that. But you don't seriously believe this, do you? I'd think this was too far out for even you, Spooky."

"Well, you're wrong. Look at the facts there, Scully. Four different victims, each recalling a bright blue room, far away voices, glowing cubes, a funnily-dressed angel, and being contained in a different body."

"Glowing cubes? A different body? A bad-dressing angel? Ooh, now there's some new ones," sarcasm dripped heavily from her words. "And are you sure 'funnily' is even a word?"

Mulder just rolled his eyes in exasperation, too excited to be discouraged.

"Scully, they were all gone for a period of four to ten days, but they weren't gone. Their bodies were still there, just not their minds. Don't you get this, Scully? I don't think we're dealing with shape-shifters. Their close friends and family were able to pinpoint an exact time when the victims started to act differently. At first, they said it was only little things, like little screw-ups in what they said. But then it got bigger. One victim was a police man. Had terrible eyesight. Even wore glasses. Chased after a man down a dark street in the middle of the night with such precision, he could tell exactly where the criminal was hiding in an abandoned warehouse after his glasses had been broken. And their two children could see a different man in their place, and another man who they thought was an angel that wore strange clothing and smoked a cigar. And-

"Mulder!"

Her outburst made him stop dead in his tracks.

"What?" He was confused. Scully usually let him at least get through his ranting and raving before she shot him down.

"I'll go with you, okay? Just let me finish up these reports. In the meantime, don't you have anything constructive to do? Research on the case, maybe? Or," she gasped in mock horror. "Some of this paperwork?"

After a moment's thought, Mulder answered, "Yeah, I guess I could do some more checking up on these witnesses and everything."

Scully glared at him as he settled into a chair and hit a couple keys on his computer. She shrugged her shoulders, defeated as she knew she would be. Suddenly, a mischievous gleam manifested itself in her eyes.

"Oh, and by the way, Mulder, you might want to inform Skinner about this new case - I bet he'd be eager to see you in his office." She paused, grinning. "You can tell him all about it when you go explain the last expense report to him in your meeting in half-an-hour."

Scully laughed out loud at her partner's comical look of disbelief.

DATE UNKNOWN

PARALLEL EARTH #384264

She was running. Running so hard and so fast that she was no longer in control of her long legs. They propelled her through the dark, dense forest as if it was a normal involuntary function, swerving left or right and jumping to avoid stumbling over giant roots.

'Almost there' a detached part of her brain noted. She nodded to herself reassuringly and distractedly pushed stray strands of dirty brown hair behind her ears. She took a deep breath, chanced it, and turned to look behind her while still running.

Nothing. Just trees and leaves and other greenery. Nothing, but she knew better.

"Charlie!" a faraway voice called out. Not far enough away for her liking. She continued on without stopping - a determined warrior that refused to give in.

"Charlie!" the voice, seeming much closer now, grew angry and cried out her name yet again.

Charlie panted and reached inside her pocket.

They still haven't given up' she noted numbly, 'but it doesn't matter now'.

Still running at full speed, she pulled the timer out of her pocket and took in the readout. 'Less than a minute', she thought happily.

"Charlie! Please stop!" the desperate plea fell on deaf ears, but the owner of the voice was close enough for her to hear the gun cocking.

She froze mentally, but her legs kept moving. Another glance at the time confirmed only seventeen seconds left.

Her thoughts became a jumbled mess as the first bullet nicked the bark off a tree to her right. 'Ohmigod. Ohmigod. What am I doing

don't stop don't stop keep running have to live have to stop it have to stop it now keep running don't stop keep going'.

A bullet glanced off a tree to her left, and she snapped out of her reverie.

She pressed the red button triumphantly and the blue-purple vortex formed a few yards in front of her. Giving it her all, she pushed herself with inconceivable strength. A shot rang out and a bullet penetrated her back, plunging her face-first into the vortex and the blackness of unconsciousness.

USS ENTERPRISE

SAN DIEGO NAVAL BASE

10:00 PM LOCAL TIME

WEDNESDAY, MAY 17

The blue-white wormhole appeared suddenly, dropping Quinn, Wade, the Professor, and Rembrandt onto the hard wooden deck of a naval ship.

"Ooh," the Professor moaned. "I can't take much more of this. Out of the last twelve slides, Mr. Brown, you have landed on me nine times! My poor back!"

"Well, the twelve before that you were landing on me, and this is working out much better, don't you think?"

Laughing, the four sliders picked themselves up and briefly surveyed their surroundings.

"Just where are we?" Wade wanted to know.

"On board a naval ship," Rembrandt replied, rubbing his hands together briskly in the cool night air.

"How do you know that?" Quinn asked, curious.

"A couple of my ol' high school buddies joined up. I used to go visit them sometimes."

Quinn nodded his head and checked the timer.

"Hey, Professor," Quinn asked shakily, trying hard to keep the nervousness out of his voice.

"What's wrong, old boy?" Arturo asked cheerfully, clapping his young protege on the shoulder as he joined his side.

"Look at the reading," he instructed, lowering his voice so Wade and the Cryin' Man couldn't hear.

"Hmm. I wonder what could be causing that. There must be something on this ship that's interfering with our frequency."

"But what could be on a navy -"

"Hey, are you two telling secrets again?" Wade asked as she and Rembrandt caught up to them.

"So, when are we outta here?" Remmy asked.

"Well," Quinn started, then stopped cold and stared straight ahead.

The others took a few more steps then noticed Quinn had stopped and followed his gaze.

The four sliders were frozen in their place momentarily as five sailors stared at them in curious wonder.

"Oh man..." Rembrandt muttered. They started slowly backing away.

"Hey!" one of the sailors yelled as the group started running towards them.

"Let's get out of here!" Quinn suggested loudly, even though his three friends were already running away.

"Follow me!" Rembrandt called, making a sudden turn right. The rest followed him down into the lower decks of the ship. They passed through several corridors before Remmy decided on a safe room for them to hide in.

"C'mon," he urged quietly. "This room shouldn't be guarded too heavily."

The others filed into the room and looked around. There were mostly boxes and crates stacked to the ceiling. They cautiously made their way through the columns to the far right corner.

Rembrandt, being the first in the line, quickly ducked behind a wide stack and frantically motioned for the others to follow suit. They did, puzzled, until they heard voices.

"You have the power to stop it. You know the key. What is the secret?"

There was no reply. The voice tried again. "Are you really one of them?"

Silence.

"So, you're not going to tell me?"

"I already told you, no!" a raspy voice with a heavy accent replied.

There was some scuffling, and then the raspy voice was panting for air.

"I told you not to mess with me or my world."

Two gunshots fired in quick succession made all four sliders jump and Wade gave a cry. Luckily, the Professor put his hand over her mouth before it was really heard.

"Oh my God," she whispered through his hand.

There were footsteps and the sound of a heavy door shutting, and the sliders peaked around the corner.

A dead man wearing a suit lay sprawled in a spreading pool of crimson blood.

"So much for no murderers," Quinn whispered, pained that he had already become so desensitized to death.

"Now what?" Remmy asked, an edge of franticness to his voice.

"My guess is... we wait."

Quinn, Wade, Rembrandt, and the Professor slowly sank down on the cold concrete floor. After what seemed like an eternity, the Professor coughed and broke the spell. They closed their eyes to try to forget what they just witnessed and get some desperately-needed sleep.

3 BLOCKS FROM MCGINTY'S RESTAURANT

CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

MAY 7, 7:14 P.M.

Gary Hobson checked the battered edition of the Chicago Sun-Times again and nervously ran his fingers through his hair.

He glanced down both streets from his spot on the corner of the sidewalk.

It was the last disaster of the day he had to deal with before going home to pack and heading out to California with Chuck. As much as Gary could use the change of scenery, he was not exactly looking forward to the journey.

Chuck had been somewhat disappointed by the turn of events, but after Gary mentioned they now had to go to San Diego, he recovered rather quickly. Mumbling something about bikinis, he had agreed to meet Gary at McGinty's at 7:30.

Gary was looking forward to sleeping on the plane. Just the mere thought of sleep overjoyed him. He was so exhausted. It seemed the Paper had had it out for him the last week, no, month, or two. Or three. He had no life other than the Paper. He lived day to day only for the sole purpose of helping others. He was tired and, according to Chuck, he had stopped living his "God-given life" for himself. Even Marissa agreed the Paper was running him ragged.

But Gary had more important things to worry about than himself. Like, for instance, this shooting victim.

He checked his watch and sighed. The Paper said it happened two minutes ago, but he had been here for the past ten and nothing had happened.

'Maybe my watch is broken,' he thought, giving it a tap. 'Great.'

That's the last thing I need.'

All of a sudden, Gary heard a sound of rushing wind from above his head. He looked up in time to see a body falling on top of him. The weight of the body and the force of gravity, even without the surprise factor, were enough to knock Gary to the ground. His head made contact with the sidewalk and the corner of a fire hydrant. The last thing Gary saw before sinking into oblivion was blood.

11:21 AM LOCAL TIME

SAN DIEGO AIRPORT

SAN DIEGO, CALIFORNIA

"So, where are we going first?" Mac asked, climbing into the driver's seat. Harm got in the passenger side and Bud climbed in the back.

"First, we go to the hotel to check in. We have about an hour before we're supposed to meet with Captain Falcon at the Base. We'll probably be able to get a few interviews completed tonight."

"Sounds like a plan," Mac said, pulling the car onto the road.

Silence settled in over the occupants of the car.

"Bud, how're you feeling?" Harm asked when the silence became too much.

Bud mumbled a reply through his broken jaw and Harm glanced at Mac in the driver's seat.

"He said," Mac answered Harm's unasked question. "That other than a stuffy nose and not being able to talk, he's just fine."

"Thank you, Colonel," Harm understood Bud to say.

"So, Harm... Do you believe this story?"

"What story?" Harm asked, shifting in his seat to stare out the window at the passing palm trees.

"This whole vortex thing. It seems like it's too much for even Bud to handle."

Bud defended himself from the back seat, but Harm didn't bother to ask Mac to translate.

"I don't know. It seems kind of strange. And these FBI agents we'll be working with, they have quite a reputation, too. What do you think, Mac?"

"I'm not sure what to think. The stories seem to corroborate each other, but there must be a simpler explanation. People just don't appear out of nowhere."

"Well, I agree, but I don't understand how they could suddenly appear on the dock from the sky. There has to be something going on,

something no one wants to tell us."

Mac laughed.

"Isn't that always the case? I guess no one trusts JAG lawyers."

Harm smiled, but his mind was elsewhere.

A few minutes later Mac guided the car into the parking lot of a two-story hotel. It was the only one in the area that still had vacancies, as three simultaneous conventions had wiped out all of the other hotels in the city.

The three lawyers got their luggage and checked into their separate rooms.

Harm was unpacking his suitcase when he heard a knock at the door.

"Come in," he called, knowing that it was Mac.

"Hey, sailor," Mac greeted, pocketing the extra key card as she closed the door behind herself.

"Hi. Are you and Bud ready?"

"Well, I am, but Bud's still on the phone with Harriet."

"I'd hate to see their phone bills," Harm joked. Mac smiled and Harm turned back to concentrating on the task in front of him.

Mac carefully sat down in one of the plush chairs. She smiled faintly at her partner, wondering how a person could be so focused on putting clothes into drawers. Suddenly her smile disappeared. He was just avoiding her again, and she missed him. It was time to have a little talk.

"Harm, could I talk to you?" She asked, instantly hating the way her voice sounded.

Across the room Harm quietly let out a breath. He knew what was coming, he just wasn't sure he was ready.

"Sure, I guess," he said, taking residence in the chair facing her but not meeting her eyes.

Mac sighed, and Harm could sense her frustration. But he still couldn't bring himself to look at her eyes. He didn't want to know, good or bad, what was waiting for his heart there.

"Harm," Mac started, and the quiet plea in her voice caused him to finally look up at her. For a moment he lost himself in her brown eyes, and it took a great effort in order to focus his whole being on hearing what she was saying... and what she wasn't.

"Harm," she repeated. "I'm going to ask you a simple question, and I would like a simple 'yes' or 'no'. I need a simple 'yes' or 'no'."



Harm nodded and felt his stomach doing flips.

Mac took a deep breath. It was now or never.

"Do you want me to marry Brumby?"

Harm blinked. Well, this answer was easy. Someone up there liked him, because he was being given a second chance. This time he wouldn't screw it up.

He opened his mouth but the word wouldn't come out. It couldn't come out, because Harmon Rabb, Jr. suddenly found himself in the future, in the body of Dr. Samuel Beckett. And Sam Beckett was in the past in Harm's body, in Harm's place. He shook his head to clear his mind and the world around him came into focus.

He was in a room, a hotel room by the looks of the cheapy decorations. A beautiful woman in a Marine outfit was staring at him expectantly.

Sam felt his stomach drop. He had a terrible feeling he was going to blow this.

"'Yes' or 'no'?" she asked quietly, searching his eyes.

"No?" Sam croaked, praying it was the right answer.

She sat back in the chair.

"You're not sure?" She asked, sounding hurt. "You don't know?" Before Sam could think up a response, she continued. "You'll never know, I guess. It was stupid of me to think it would work out. I guess what you said on the ferry was all a lie... except I guess you want me to wait for eternity... So, maybe I will marry Mic," she stood decisively. "I can't wait for you forever, Harmon Rabb."

She walked over to the door. Sam was stunned.

"I'll meet you and Bud in the car."

The door shut loudly behind her.

"I hate it when I'm right," Sam muttered.

COUNTY GENERAL HOSPITAL

CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

TUESDAY, MAY 9, 10:15 P.M.

"You were very lucky. The bullet barely missed your heart," Doctor Carter said. Charlie blinked, trying to concentrate on his words.

"...a collapsed lung... internal bleeding..."

She sighed, her focus lost for the moment. She didn't need a doctor to tell her she hurt. That much she knew. What she needed him to tell her was how and why she was here in the first place.

"Where am I?"

"You're in Chicago's County General Hospital. You just had major surgery... you weren't listening were you?"

Charlie shook her head and groaned when a wave of nausea bombarded her.

"What happened? I mean, why am I here?"

"Well," he took a deep breath. "We don't exactly know. We were hoping you could tell us. It appears that you fell from a building after being shot... do you remember anything?"

Restraining herself from shaking her head- after all, she had learned her lesson- she simply told him "no". The implication of her answer hit her. She suddenly felt panicked, and it was hard for her to catch her breath. He glanced away, looking down at his feet. Charlie realized for the first time how young he was. For some reason she felt even more panicked.

"Why?" she managed to force out.

"I was, uh, just getting to that," The doctor walked a few paces and stopped. "You see, the brain is a highly sophisticated organ, very sensitive. We don't understand everything about it yet."

"And..." she urged with a growing feeling similar to free-falling in an elevator.

"And," he repeated. "Well, you fell from a good distance. You were, uh, lucky because someone broke your fall, but you still managed to hit your head while you were unconscious. Many of your forgotten memories will eventually come back to you, most likely in the form of dreams or mild flashbacks."

Charlie absorbed this information with a careful nod. "Who broke my fall?" She struggled against the tubes to sit up. "Can I see who saved me?"

Doctor Carter nodded and pointed to the curtain to her right. When he had her attention, he drew back the curtain so she could see.

Memories or no memories, Charlie instantly recognized the motionless body lying in the bed next to hers.

"Kyle," she breathed. The doctor looked at her.

"This man has no ID. You know him?"

"Just slightly," she whispered.

"He hasn't regained consciousness," Dr. Carter said softly. He walked slowly to the end of the bed and picked up his chart. "Kyle, did you say?"

"Kyle Schweitzer," she said, her voice finally finding volume. "My husband."

NEVER NEVER LAND

SOMEWHERE IN NEVADA

MAY 20

"Hurry, Parker! We don't have much time!"

"Don't you think I know that, Talmadge?" Frank Parker snapped as he climbed inside the large blue sphere.

"Good luck, Frank," Olga called. Frank smiled back at her.

"Remember - the Enterprise docks on May 17th. You have to stop the Chinese ambassador before-"

Frank interrupted him.

"Before all this happens," he said, gesturing with his hands. "Don't worry. I know."

With that, Frank Parker was shut inside the sphere.

Moments later, the journey of backstepping through time began. Frank traveled back seven days into the past, before the horror on board the Enterprise, before the Invasion, before the end of humanity.

And seven days in the future, all his friends and co-workers were killed.

J EDGAR HOOVER BUILDING

WASHINGTON, D.C.

MAY 18, 3:48 PM

The only sound in the basement office was the clack of computer keys and Mulder cracking open sunflower seeds in his mouth.

Scully was busily catching up with paperwork. She hadn't realized how much she had been letting go until the stack of papers in her IN box fell on the floor; it had taken her close to five minutes just to pick them all up again.

Mulder, on the other hand, was working away at his desk, typing and clicking his mouse in an almost discernible pattern. Scully figured he was doing research for the case, his latest flight of fancy.

The sudden ringing of the phone made both of the agents jump. Mulder recovered first, and quickly put the receiver to his mouth.

"Mulder," he said, his voice rough from lack of use.

Scully watched in idle fascination as Mulder "um-hum"ed, "uh-huh"ed, and "yes, sir"ed his way through a quick conversation.

Three and a half minutes later, Mulder hung up the phone.

"Well, Scully," he started, and his partner groaned. "It looks like

all our paperwork is going to have to wait, along with our case, because we've just been assigned a new one."

"A new one?" Scully asked. "I know I'm going to regret asking, but what's it about?"

"Skinner wants us to do a joint venture with some Navy lawyers in trying to solve a .... well, a 'spooky' one. We have to go get packed, though. Our plane leaves in two hours. I'll give ya the details on the way."

Sighing, Agent Dana Scully saved the open files on her computer, shut it off, and grabbed her purse. Mulder gathered his things, and she reluctantly followed him out their basement office door.

McGINTY'S BAR

CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

TUESDAY, MAY 16, 1:39 A.M.

Chuck Fishman sighed quietly and ran his fingers through his hair.

It had been over a week since Gary's disappearance and he was worried sick. He was terrified something was wrong - something had to be. It was not like Gary, or the Paper for that matter, to not show up for so long.

Chuck glanced around him in the empty bar, feeling completely helpless. He hadn't been able to shake the feeling since that afternoon when he had realized Gary wasn't coming back. Ever since, there had been a constant pang inside of him and a growing sense of dread and fear as each day went by with no news. Detective Crumb and his cops were still looking, and Chuck's daily calls to all of the Chicagoland hospitals had proved fruitless. No Gary Hobsons, no John Does matching his description. It was like he had just...vanished.

Chuck raised his half-empty beer bottle to his mouth and took a deep swig. He was tired. Marissa had tried futilely to send Chuck home, but he would have none of it. He was embarrassed to admit it, but staying alone in the bar with his memories and sleeping on Gary's couch helped him keep his hope alive.

"What hope?" he wondered out loud. His voice sounded strange to his ears. If it didn't happen this time, there was bound to be a next. Gary couldn't always come home unscratched; they had all learned that already. That damn paper had taken over Gary's life and would surely be his death! 'If it wasn't already', Chuck reminded himself drearily.

Marissa remained hopeful. She had her faith. Chuck, however, was standing on the edge of the pit leading to hopeless despair, willing to take the plunge.

Chuck sighed, standing indecisively. He felt so lost without his best friend. After a few moments, he turned decidedly to the stairs.

He laid on Gary's couch a few minutes later, staring up through the

darkness at the ceiling, unblinking. He wondered vaguely where Gary was at that exact moment. His thoughts eventually turned to the paper. Whenever Gary had disappeared before, the paper had always shown up somewhere. It predicted future doom and allowed them to stop it. But, Chuck realized, his biggest fear was coming true: the paper didn't come because he couldn't do anything to stop it - something had already happened to his friend.

Chuck drifted off to an uneasy sleep almost two and a half hours later, after cursing the paper with all his might.

Meow. Thump.

Chuck jerked awake, shaking his head as if to clear it. He checked his watch - 6:00. It was the most consecutive sleep he had gotten in over a week.

Meow.

Chuck blinked, the implication of the noise not lost on him.

He stared at the door and the anger returned. He didn't want to read about his best friend's body being found. It was bad enough the paper put Gary through hell. He didn't want that to happen to him if he could help it.

He slowly got up, cast a derogatory glance at the door, and headed to the kitchen for coffee.

The cat started meowing as he sipped from the mug. Long, sad, annoying cries that tried Chuck's patience.

"I will NOT open that door!" he shouted determinedly, but even then he was grabbing the doorknob. Suddenly he understood the stress and terrible burden his best friend experienced every morning.

"What do you want?" he asked crossly. The orange tabby stared up at him and blinked slowly.

"What did you do to Gary?" he demanded as the cat rubbed up against his ankles sympathetically.

Chuck's eyes wandered down to the early edition and settled on the horrible headline: 'Chicago Couple Among Dead in San Diego Fire'. Under the bold words he noticed a familiar face next to a picture of a young, pretty, brown-haired woman. 'Kyle and Charity Schweitzer were among the victims' the caption read.

"Kyle Schweitzer?!? That's Gary!"

Chuck skimmed the article feverishly and turned to call Marissa. Something was up all right. He had packing to do. He was needed in San Diego.

COUNTY GENERAL HOSPITAL

CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

MAY 17, 7:48 PM

Charity Schweitzer sighed. After spending over a week in the hospital, the doctors decided she could go home tomorrow. Kyle, on the other hand, had been flitting in and out of the conscious world. Doctor Carter told her that her husband had hit his head pretty hard, and it didn't look good for him. No one but Charlie was optimistic.

She glanced over at his conscious-but-silent form with sadness in her heart. A nurse was changing the dressings on his head and his face was scrunched up in pain.

"How do you feel, Kyle?" Charlie asked as soon as the nurse left. She had been dying to talk to him since he awakened earlier that morning, but they hadn't been left alone long enough.

"Ugh, I don't feel well - my head hurts a lot," he admitted, then turned to face her as best he could. "Kyle?"

She studied him seriously, taking in the brown hair peeking out from the new bandages and the familiar puppy-dog green eyes that were now filled with confusion.

"You don't remember?"

He shook his head, then winced at the repercussions of his act.

"I don't remem - it hurts too much to try."

She nodded slightly, tears welling up in her eyes. 'At least he's alive', she reminded herself. 'At least he's with me. The rest would fall into place eventually.'

"That's okay," she said soothingly. "But we have to get out of here. They won't release you anytime soon, but we don't have the time. We have to leave," She paused, debating, before continuing. "I don't remember everything either," she confessed. "But I do remember more than you. I was escaping - we were escaping from the Kromaggs. I guess you beat me." She smiled at Kyle, and received a small smile in return.

"We can't just sit here. They'll find us. I'm surprised they haven't already."

Her words were met with a blank stare.

"You don't remember," she said matter-of-factly. "That's okay. We just need to get out of here. When I get my clothes back tonight, we'll have some money and the timers. We can make the red-eye to San Diego. I'll straighten everything out."

"Timers? San Diego?"

"Boy, you went down harder than I thought," she sighed. "Just answer one question... Do you trust me?"

He stared at Charlie for a moment, then turned away. Images had been assaulting him since he had awakened, but he couldn't put any meaning to them. Names, people, places - all stood at the tip of his tongue, but his mind was too muddled to make the extra effort to connect them into something that could help him. For a moment a name came to him -

Gary Hobson, a man from Hickory, Indiana, living in Chicago, with friends and a bar and a secret- but only for a moment. When he tried to remember, to grasp hold of it again, it vanished and left him confused and frustrated.

He had met this Charity - Charlie, a voice inside of him corrected instantly- in this hospital. For all he knew he had never met her before. He had no recollection of how he had gotten into the condition he was in, but he had no reason not to believe Charity. Charlie. She had been the only constant since the accident, the only thing that hadn't changed. Every second he couldn't remember something, he felt like he was letting her down. He had no reason not to trust her.

"Yes, I trust you," he finally admitted.

"Good," Charlie smiled and he felt something in his heart. His breath caught in his throat momentarily. Maybe they were married. He wished with all his might that he could remember.

"So, how exactly are we going to get out?" he asked, curious.

Charlie released a sigh of relief.

"Don't worry about that," she assured. "I have a plan that works every time."

"Every time?" he asked, surprised. "You've done this before?"

"Sure. Well, not exactly from a hospital, but I've escaped from places more heavily guarded than this. You, too. It's easy, We'll be in San Diego by tomorrow morning."

True to her word, Kyle and Charity Schweitzer were stepping into the San Diego Airport the very next morning. They were headed to the phones so Charlie could call a taxi when she caught sight of the local newspaper. She and Kyle scraped together some change and Charlie removed the paper from the dispenser. "Chinese Ambassador Murdered on Enterprise," she read the headline to Kyle, and shook her head. "No, no, no. It's supposed to be the Russian. Kyle, we've failed!"

Kyle embraced his wife reassuringly. She scanned the article and gasped.

"Oh, this is too perfect."

"What?" Kyle asked, confused, as Charlie darted off to the phones.

Charlie hung up the phone triumphantly by the time her husband caught up with her.

"What is going on?"

"An old friend of mine, Sarah MacKenzie, is one of the investigators. Her plane is arriving in an hour."

"And..?"

"And we'll tell her everything. She'll be able to get us on the Base. She'll be able to help us stop the invasion."

Kyle nodded and sat next to his wife.

"We'll follow her to her hotel when she arrives, and we can talk to her tonight." She leaned against her husband and closed her eyes.

"We're finally going to fix it, Kyle. The nightmare will be over."

ROYAL OAK HOTEL

SAN DIEGO

MAY 18, 9:13 P.M. PT

"Who are we working with on this case?" Scully asked, yawning, as Mulder checked them into the hotel.

"A Lt. Cmdr. Harmon Rabb , Jr., Colonel Sarah Mackenzie, and a Lt. Bud Roberts. They're all JAG lawyers. The cream of the crop, according to Skinner."

"He actually said that?" Scully asked incredulously.

"Yeah, he did. I was surprised, too."

"So when - " Scully stopped and Mulder followed her stare.

"Is that-"

"Chuck Fishman?"

One of the two figures turned around at Scully's question.  
"Wh-"

"Hello, Mr. Fishman. Long time, no see. How are you?"

Both Chuck and Marissa were now facing the two agents, dumbfounded.

"Did they bug McGinty's?" Chuck whispered so only Marissa could hear him. Marissa just shook her head, as confused as her friend.

"H- Hello, Mr. Mulder, Ms. Scully," he coughed. "Small world."

"Yes. If you don't mind my asking, why are you in San Diego?"

"We, uh, well, we have some ... business to attend to," Chuck fumbled, nodding enthusiastically.

"We?" Scully asked curiously, gesturing with her head to the blind woman and dog by his side.

"Agents Mulder and Scully, this is Marissa Clark. She's a friend of mine and," he swallowed hard. "Gary's."



"Where is Gary?" Scully continued with the questions, apparently ignoring Chuck's introductions.

"That's a good question, actually. It's part of the reason I'm here."

"There isn't going to be another bombing, is there?" Mulder asked. Chuck heard a hint of curiosity, suspicion, and something he couldn't put his finger on in Mulder's voice.

"No, no. No bombings, I assure you," Chuck said. quickly. He stared at the two FBI Agents he had met about a year ago, at a total loss for words.

"It's Gary," Marissa said worriedly. "We can't find him. He's been missing for over a week. We know he's somewhere in San Diego, and... something bad is going to happen to him soon."

"Like what?"

"Well, we can't say," Marissa said shyly. She had only just met these agents, she didn't know if she could trust them.

"You're FBI. Can you help us find him?" Chuck asked suddenly, looking as if a light bulb had appeared over his head.

"Well, we -" Mulder and Scully looked at each other.

"Please," Chuck pleaded. "He's in trouble."

"And he's not the only one," Marissa piped up. "Tell them about the reason you and Gary were coming to San Diego."

"There's going to be a murder on a navy ship." Chuck said gravely. "Well, actually, there's already been one, but there's going to be more unless we can get on the ship and stop it."

Mulder and Scully were a little taken aback, and tried not to show it.

"How - What ship?"

"The USS Enterprise," Marissa told them. Chuck narrowed his eyes.

"What does that matter?" he asked suspiciously.

Scully glanced at Mulder and they held a quick, wordless conversation.

"What do you know about the murder?" she asked, ignoring Chuck's question.

"We know a Chinese ambassador was murdered," Chuck said, somewhat defensive. "And we know more people will be killed unless we can somehow get on board that ship and stop it."

"Is this another one of your hunches?" Mulder asked, not unkindly.

"Well, yeah, you could say that, except Gary's the one who has the hunches. I'm just trying to help."

Mulder turned to Scully and she knew they'd be discussing Hobson, Fishman. and Clark later.

"Let's go," Mulder announced, leading them into the elevator. "We can get you on the Base, but you'll have to pretend to be FBI agents. Think you can handle it?"

Chuck and Marissa nodded. Spike barked. Anything for Gary.

"Fishman, you'll be Agent Jabituya, and Ms. Clark, you'll be Agent Tamzarian. It'll just take a moment for my friends to make the IDs," Mulder assured them. Moments later, the Lone Gunman sent Mulder what he needed via Scully's laptop, and they printed it off using the hotel's printer.

Agents Mulder, Scully, Jabituya, and Tamzarian piled into a rental car and headed for the San Diego Naval Base.

9:21 PM LOCAL TIME

BRIG OF SAN DIEGO NAVAL BASE

THURSDAY, MAY 18

Sam was enthralled by what Quinn Mallory was telling him.

"Fascinating," he commented as the young genius explained how he had figured out how to travel between dimensions.

"So, what are some of the different worlds like?" Sam wanted to know.

Wade stepped in.

"Well, we've been to so many of them...let's see... there was one controlled by the Soviets. That was a bad one.... there was one where lawyers settled things with guns - like in an old western.... And there was one where we slid into a, like, protective park for dinosaurs."

Sam's eyes were wide and his heart quivered with understanding and sympathy. They were just trying to get home like he was.

"We had a major mishap once," Quinn volunteered. "Well, more than once, but this one time I was the last one through the vortex on a rainy world, and lightning struck the wormhole just as I went through. On the next world, I was on a different plane. Only one girl could see and hear me. That was a pretty bad one."

"No, no," Remmy interrupted. "One of our worst, well, most interesting sliding experiences was the one where the fetus of my double's wife was implanted into me. Some sort of epidemic had made it impossible for women to carry babies to term, so the males received the baby for the last trimester. And, to top it off, it turned out someone was trying to kill my double."

"That was a particularly bad one for you, Mr. Brown, but I can say, without argument, that our worst sliding experience was the Kromaggs."

All four shuddered. Sam raised his eyebrows.

"Kromaggs?" he asked curiously.

"Yeah," Quinn explained, taking a deep breath. "Well, you see, we slid onto this world--"

The young man was interrupted by a knock on the door.

"Commander?" A petty officer asked tentatively.

"Yes?" The officer entered the room.

"The Captain wants to see you, Colonel MacKenzie, and Lieutenant Roberts when the FBI agents arrive. Both the Colonel and the Lieutenant are not answering their phones. Do you have any idea where they could be?"

"Yes, they're probably at the hotel. I was just about to head over there myself. Do you want me to tell them for you?"

"I would appreciate that, sir. I'll tell the Captain you'll be back here in about an hour?"

"That should be plenty of time."

The officer left, and Sam turned to the sliders.

"I'll talk to you later," he assured. "I want to hear more."

The four prisoners looked at each other as the door shut.

"Do you think he believes us?" Wade asked. "No one usually does."

"He's different," Quinn insisted in a far-away voice. "He knows we're telling the truth."

"Ah, yes, but the other two didn't seem to believe us. I wouldn't believe us if I were them. So how's he going to prove it?" The professor asked quietly, not expecting an answer.

All four sliders shook their heads.

USS ENTERPRISE

SAN DIEGO NAVAL BASE

MAY 17, 9:48 PM

Frank Parker sighed as he finally got past security. The guards hadn't been too keen on admitting an NSA officer, but luckily Frank had official orders with him.

He quickened his pace after he glanced at his watch. If he didn't hurry, the Chinese Ambassador would kill the Russian, the invasion

would start, and it would be the end of the world. Again.

He was so busy searching the ships for the USS Enterprise that he ran right into someone and knocked them over.

"Sorry," he mumbled, reaching a hand down to pick up the person.

"It's okay," the person replied, his voice hidden in the darkness. A streetlight reflected off of a shiny object in his hand, and Frank realized the man he had bumped into was carrying a gun.

"Frank Parker?"

This caught him by surprise.

"Who are you?" Frank asked. The man searched Parker's face for a moment.

"You don't remember me?" the voice asked, sounding a bit hurt.

"Well, it's not that, it's just too dark-" and Frank stopped as the man stepped forward into the ring of light.

"Kyle Schweitzer!" Frank exclaimed, and they shared a quick guy-hug. "How've you been? I haven't seen you in... forever!"

"Yeah, that's always what happens, huh?" Kyle asked as they began to walk side by side.

"How've you been since college?"

"Well, I got married."

"Really? Do I know the poor girl?"

"No," Kyle laughed. "If I mentioned anything about you, she probably wouldn't left me."

"Ouch," Frank said lightly. Silence settled in for a few minutes. "So, what are you doing here?" he asked at last, getting down to business. "With a gun?" he added in a whisper.

Kyle smiled in the darkness, but Frank couldn't see him.

"I'm here on a top-secret mission to save the world."

Frank laughed.

"Me, too. Who do you have to kill, the Chinese Ambassador?"

"The Chinese Ambassador?" Kyle asked, surprised. "No, I have to get rid of the Russian. He's a Kromagg, and he's going to destroy the world."

Frank was shocked, but only momentarily.

"I won't ask you how you know that, but I have to say you're wrong. I can't tell you how I know, but the Kromagg is the Chinese."

"Really? How do you know?" Kyle asked, then remembered. "Oh yeah... but are you sure? I have reason to believe it's the Russian."

"Nope," by then they had reached the USS Enterprise. "That's what they wanted you to think. If you kill the Russian, the Chinese Ambassador will destroy the world."

Kyle nodded as they walked up to board the ship.

"Okay, but since we both can't kill him, can I do it? It's sort-of a personal thing."

Frank nodded. "Be my guest. I just have to make sure he dies."

They managed to get past security and made their way to where they both knew the Chinese Ambassador would be.

9:19 PM LOCAL TIME

ROYAL OAK HOTEL

THURSDAY, MAY 18

Colonel Sarah Mackenzie sighed in frustration. It had been a long day.

Aside from both Harm and Bud acting strangely, she had the case to deal with. After their initial interview she had wanted to believe the innocence of the four defendants, but the evidence against them was too strong. 'If only they could identify the murderer', Mac thought to herself. They all separately claimed they heard another voice, but they weren't able to discern if the voice was male or female. To add to the problem, everyone else who had been on board the ship had solid alibis.

Mac sighed again as she entered her room. She had strong convictions of their innocence. Mac had learned to trust her gut, but knew that Harm would never believe her if she based her conclusion solely on a feeling.

Her thoughts led her to a subject that was very dear to her heart : Harm. What had been up with him lately? He was acting so strangely, ever since the trip to Australia. Sure, she had been surprised by Mic's proposal, and she honestly did not know what her answer would be, but Harm had looked crushed at the airport. She had wanted to talk to him on the plane but he had fallen asleep. He hadn't spoken to her all week, except for the little incident in her office that morning.

She sank onto the bed and removed her shoes. The encounter still baffled the hell out of her. What was he going to tell her?

Could it have been the words she had longed to hear for years now? The words she was so sure he would speak when she spilled her heart to him again on the ferry?

She laughed out loud at the thought. Yeah, right, Marine. Harmon Rabb professing his undying love for you. Grow up. You'll never be able to

be together. He had even told her that, had let her down as gently as possible... but still...

He had made her a promise, one she was determined to hold him to. He had promised to her, that day that Harriet had Baby AJ, that in five years, if neither of them were in a relationship, they would have a child together.

Harm always kept his promises.

And yet, Mac knew it probably would never happen. She and Harm were not destined to be together - it was as simple as that.

She suddenly missed Chloe very much. It helped having a Little Sister who knew more about her relationships than Mac did.

She plopped on her back on the bed and turned to glance at the clock - she, Harm, and Bud should be meeting the FBI agents soon.

She grabbed her key card and left her room, heading down the hall to the vending machines. She was craving a candy bar.

Moments later, she returned to her room and noticed a white envelope taped to her door.

'Sarah' was scrawled on the front in a handwriting she knew was neither Harm's nor Bud's.

She glanced around her; the hallway was empty. She entered her room and sat on the bed. Slowly and cautiously she opened the envelope, unconcerned for the moment with saving the prints.

She read the hastily- written letter three times, refolded it, and stuffed it back in the envelope.

The few words on the page, already engraved in her mind, played itself over and over while Mac tried to decide what to do.

Good ol' Sarah - 'Should I go?' Mac wondered - I know it's been a while and for that I'm sorry. - 'Who is this person?' - I have been quite busy but I know that's no excuse. - 'I have to know this person. Who could it be?' - I have important information that I need to tell you, ASAP. - 'Is this person telling the truth?' - Please meet me in the hotel lobby as soon as you're done reading this. - 'This person knows where my room is'. - Come alone. - 'Is this dangerous? Should I tell Harm?' - Sincerely, C.S. - 'Who do I know with initials C.S.'?

"C.S.?" Mac asked aloud, trying to stop the record in her head. She tried desperately to think of a C.S. from her past, but gave up and stood. She paced back and forth for a few minutes, debating the pros and cons. Finally, deciding that it was the best idea, Mac left her room for the lobby.

The room was empty from what the Colonel could tell, but she knew full well that appearances could be deceiving.

"C.S.?" she called tentatively.

Silence.

"Hi, Sarah!"

Mac spun around and froze in shock.

"Charity! Oh my God! How have you been?" Mac approached her and they hugged.

"Well, things have been better," Charity replied truthfully, tucking a stray brown strand of hair behind her ear. "What about you, Major?"

"It's Colonel now."

"Congratulations!"

"Thanks. I've been doing well. Very busy."

"How's your Marine training holding up?" Charity sat down in one of the gaudy stuffed chairs and Mac joined her.

"I'm still a jar head."

"And that hot partner of yours? How's he? Have you two hooked up yet?"

Mac smiled despite herself. "He's fine, and no we haven't." She paused. "So, what are you doing in San Diego?"

"The Enterprise," she stated simply. It was, after all, the truth.

"Stationed on the Enterprise? Really? I don't remember running across your name when we checked the crew's alibis..."

"Well, I'm married now. Charity Schweitzer."

"Congratulations!"

"Thanks! I've been meaning to call you up, but we've been busy, too..." Charity trailed off.

"Is he here in San Diego?"

"Oh, Kyle?" Charlie asked absentmindedly. "He's picking up some things from the store, and then he's bringing dinner to the Base."

Silence filled the room and it grew stuffy with anxiety.

"I know you didn't leave that note just so we could catch up. What's going on? What do you know?"

"Is there somewhere we can talk in private?"

"Sure, my hotel room."

Once they were safely inside, Mac locked the door and sat on the bed. Charity remained standing. She took a deep breath and stared into Mac

with silvery ice-blue eyes.

"Do you still have the open mind you had when we were kids?"

Mac laughed nervously.

"Things have changed since then, but I'll listen to your story."

"You're a lawyer now. Just pretend I'm your client. You have to believe everything I say."

"I don't ha-"

"You have to believe everything I say."

Mac nodded, slightly stunned at her old friend's passion.

"Every ounce I speak is the truth. I'm here on a mission."

"Here? San Diego?"

Charity looked down and shook her head.

"Not exactly... I don't know where to start with this whole thing."

"Start at the beginning," Mac urged gently.

"Okay," Charity said decisively. "I have to stop this now, so let's begin." She began pacing.

Mac took a breath and settled into her spot on the bed, ready to listen to the story her friend was about to tell.

Charity paused in her pacing and faced Mac.

"First of all," she started, and began pacing again. "The four sliders are innocent. They arrived on the ship and witnessed, well, witnessed someone kill Cho."

"Someone? You don't know who?"

"I'm getting to that. First, did the sliders tell you about sliding?"

Mac fumbled. "Well, they... did, but I - I didn't pay much attention."

Charity sighed. "Well, sliding between parallel worlds is possible, and quite common in some dimensions. I myself am a Slider - I do not belong to this world. Kyle is also a slider. You see, there are others - called the Kromaggs - that want to overtake and/or destroy every parallel earth. The four sliders know of them - they've encountered their kind before. Kromaggs are terrible. They are evil but vastly intelligent and technologically superior."

"Whoa, whoa. Slow down. I don't -"

"I can't slow down. Just sit quietly and absorb these facts. Pretend



you're at school, okay? There isn't much time."

Mac nodded.

"On many parallel worlds, so, so many, the Kromagg invasion has started, and many times right here- on the USS Enterprise. The Kromaggs knew about the sliding technology being transported and one of them took human form to intercept it. I had reason to believe the disguised human was Globenshav, the Russian Ambassador, but I realized it was really Cho. Follow me so far?"

Another nod.

"Good. Now, on the other worlds I've mostly arrived too late. Sometimes, because each world is different, you and Harm weren't there, but many times you were. Now, this time I ended up in Chicago. I had been captured in the last world, the Kromaggs must have messed around with my timer. I found Kyle by dumb luck in Chicago - he had escaped, too- and we got here as soon as possible. It was too late for us to do anything, but luckily someone beat us to it. Someone already stopped it."

"Wait - stop what?"

"Haven't you been paying attention?!? The invasion! We have to stop the Kromagg invasion! On the majority of the other worlds, you, Harm, Bud, Mulder, and Scully-"

"Wait - who are Mulder and Scully?"

"Oh, you'll meet them shortly. They're the FBI agents assigned to work with you on the case. Anyway, you all come aboard to investigate the appearance of the sliders and the murder of the Russian ambassador."

"Russian? Hang on, Charlie. I'm confused."

"Okay, the Chinese ambassador - the Kromagg- killed the Russian in other histories and took the sliding technology. Then one of their ships arrive and the Kromaggs take over. They kill everyone on the boat. Then they kill millions more. Whatever's left of humanity becomes slaves and prisoners."

Mac laughed. "I'm sorry, Charlie, but I'm in over my head. I don't believe what you're saying, and even if I did I wouldn't know what to do about it."

Charity's face fell, but she was more determined than ever. She was too close now, much too close to just give up.

"I thought the invasion was stopped. I thought that by killing Cho, it would thwart the Kromaggs' plans. But now I'm not so sure."

"How do you know?" Mac asked, curious despite herself.

Charlie visibly whitened, and Mac could sense her terror.

"If it's too-"

"No, no. I'll talk. It's just... it's very... the Kromaggs invaded

our world about six months ago. We were much like the others - we couldn't stop them. Some of us escaped through our sliding wormholes, but they somehow managed to track us. They followed me.."

She took a breath, near tears. "I'm getting ahead of myself. We weren't the first conquered world. There was a resistance group. A few of us traveled to the different worlds, trying to recruit others to help our cause. I stayed on this one safe world with our children while my husband Kyle..." she trailed off again. Mac watched her silently as she sank into a chair and visibly regained composure.

"They captured Kyle and tortured him. They... looked into his mind and saw his thoughts. He betrayed us all and it wasn't even his fault. The Kromaggs destroyed the resistance. They killed all the leaders... except for Kyle. Word reached me of what had happened and I grew terrified. I took his spare timer and left with Dustin and Stephanie - our two children. I didn't know what I was doing, where I was going... and they caught us." She paused and looked Mac in the eye, no longer an old friend or a hardened warrior but a distraught mother. "They took my children, Sarah, and they murdered them right in front of my eyes. I was chained to a wall - I couldn't do anything! They killed my babies!" Her voice broke, and sobs wracked her small bruised frame. "They didn't stop there. No, no. They made me watch while they tortured my Kyle. Then they tortured me," her voice grew so quiet that even though she was sitting right next to her, Mac had to strain to hear. "Days, weeks, or mere hours, I dunno. I lost track of time. The physical pain was unbearable, so I'd escape into my mind, but the emotional pain hurt more. But these... creatures," she spat the word out. "They didn't stop there either. They did the one thing they knew that would push me over the edge... they performed an operation. I was a guinea pig, they turned half of my mind into a Kromagg's. I could hear some of what they were thinking, what they were planning. I learned they were going to kill me the next day. But then I did the one thing they weren't expecting my tired, abused self to do - I escaped."

"And then what?" Mac was totally enthralled by the story. For some reason, she no longer doubted her friend.

"They shot me as I was entering the wormhole. I ended up in Chicago, and Kyle broke my fall. We were in the hospital for a week, but we had to escape to come kill the Kromagg. We arrived here too late, but I saw your name in the paper and knew I had to talk to you. I knew you could help me get on the Enterprise, help me in my quest to bring back the resistance."

"But, Charlie, you still haven't answered my question. How did you know that we still get invaded?"

"I told you about my surgery. I'm connected to them. I have to be careful because they can sometimes hear me. I can hear what they're thinking though, and I know it didn't work."

"How do you know it's not a trick?"

"I don't," she said simply.

There was a knock at the door.

"Who is it?" Mac asked, walking to the door without taking her eyes off Charity.

It was Harm.

"Um, sorry to interrupt."

"It's okay."

"I've been looking for you, Colonel. There's been a slight change in plans - Captain Falcon wants to meet up at the Base when the FBI agents arrive, and their flight got in a little while ago. Have you seen Bud?"

"No I haven't. He's probably in his room. Thanks, Harm," Mac said, finally turning her eyes to her partner as he left.

"The time is drawing near," Charlie whispered conspiratorially.

Mac sighed as she stood.

"I want you to come with me," Mac informed her, reopening her door.

Charity nodded, satisfied yet anxious as she followed her friend out the door.

9:56 PM LOCAL TIME

SAN DIEGO NAVAL BASE

THURSDAY, MAY 18

Admiral Albert Calavicci was confused.

"Ziggy, there has to be a reason he's meeting up with them again."

Sam didn't even hear his friend - he had a much more important conversation to listen to.

"... this matter is more serious than any of us could have guessed," the Captain was saying.

Sam nodded, his mind whirling. Something big was going on. Something big, that, for some reason, involved three of the same people he had encountered before. Even though one of the names was different, he knew in his heart that they were the same people.

Something had to have happened in the several months since he had leaped into Gary Hobson, something that would make God, fate, time, or whatever bunch them all together again. Something that needed fixing again.

After the round of the introductions, the Captain instructed Sam and Mac to take the group to a conference room and fill the newcomers in on the developments so far.

Mac led them all to Conference Room B, where Charity Schweitzer sat pensively in one of the chairs, apparently awaiting their arrival.

Sam looked at Mac questioningly.

"Everyone, this is Charity Schweitzer."

Charity stood and took in the crowd.

"Please, call me Charlie," she said distractedly as she shook hands and absorbed everyone's names.

Charlie pulled Mac aside.

"They've never been here before," she whispered, distressed.

"Who? Agents Jabituya and Tamzarian?"

Charity nodded forcefully. "I wouldn't trust them."

"We'll see," Mac said, turning to the expectant group. "My friend here has a story for you all to hear."

Charity's blue orbs grew large in her head. She shook her head ever so slightly, staring at Marissa and Chuck.

"Please, Sarah... I can't..."

Chuck cocked his head ever so slightly. 'This woman looks familiar' he thought to himself. 'Where have I seen her face?'

"Something fishy is going on," Al announced in Sam's ear. The Leaper turned partially so he could focus on both Charity and Al.

"Ziggy's done some checking. This girl says she's Charity Schweitzer, but there's a Charity Schweitzer that looks just like her in North Carolina. She's married, has two kids, and is in the Navy."

"Are you sure?" Sam whispered. Al nodded, looking down at his handlink.

"Ziggy is positive. There is no other Charity Schweitzer listed and besides, they have the same fingerprints." He paused and looked at Sam. "So this must mean that...sliding...is possible."

Sam nodded, and turned his attention to the wary woman standing in front of the room.

"I know you all may not believe me..." she started. "If I were you, I wouldn't either. But I speak the truth, and I must know the truth before I start. Who are you?" she asked Chuck and Marissa.

Chuck gulped nervously and coughed.

"I'm Agent Benjamin Jabituya," he said unconvincingly.

Al shook his head at Sam.

"It's a cover story. He's still Chuck Fishman and that's Marissa Clark."

"I knew it!" Sam exclaimed out loud. The group turned to look at him, curiosity etched in their faces.

"They're lying. You're Chuck Fishman and Marissa Clark!"

Chuck looked at Mulder and Scully. Shock registered on all their faces, and franticness on Chuck's. Marissa reached down and nervously patted Spike on the head.

An uncomfortable silence fell over them. They stared at each other in the room, in pairs: Sam and Mac, Mulder and Scully, and Marissa and Chuck. Charity stood aside, staring at Chuck and Marissa impatiently.

"Okay, okay," Chuck said, cracking under the pressure. "It's true. Marissa and I aren't agents with the FBI. We're just average, run-of-the-mill people from Chicago. We own a bar named McGinty's and we're just here looking for our missing friend Gary, and, and,"

"And we've met them before," Mulder spoke up. "They're good people."

"Gary and Chuck helped us with a would-have-been bombing in DC last year. We met up with Chuck and Marissa in the same hotel purely by coincidence," at this, Scully received a look from Mulder that reminded her what he thought of coincidences. "And they told us about the murder on this ship and said that more murders were going to occur if they didn't come along to help us."

"And you believed them?"

Scully looked at Charity.

"Yes. We had no reason not to."

"So," Charlie said, walking up to the two Chicagoans and inspecting them from head to toe, back to front. "Are you psychics or something?"

"Gary is. We're not," Chuck said quickly.

"It's okay, you know," Charlie said reassuringly. "I was just worried you were Kromaggs."

Sam froze.

"Kromaggs?"

Charlie spun to face him and Chuck sighed in relief, tugging out the copy of the Sun-Times.

"Yeah, Kromaggs...did the Sliders tell you about them?"

Sam nodded dumbly. "Well, they were before we were interrupted."

"Okay, that's okay. I'm just gonna tell you all everything," she looked at Mac. "I already told Sarah, and this is the only way to stop it."

"Stop what?" Scully asked curiously.

"The invasion," Chuck whispered under his breath, staring at the headline of the paper. No one heard him. He quietly folded up the paper as Charity started her story, but the movement did not go unnoticed.

11:51 PM LOCAL TIME

SAN DIEGO NAVAL BASE

THURSDAY, MAY 18

Charity looked at the amazed faces that were a result of her tale. She tried to calculate which people believed her but a knock on the door interrupted her thoughts.

"Come in," Mac said. Having heard the story once, she was the most recovered of the audience.

Frank Parker and Kyle Schweitzer entered the room. All eyes turned to face them.

"We were told we could find you all here. "I'm Frank Parker," he said, taking a step further into the room and allowing Chuck a view of the other visitor. "And this is-"

"GARY!" Chuck shouted excitedly, and embraced his friend in a bear hug before Kyle had a chance to react.

"Gary?" Kyle asked, confused.

"What, are you kidding me?" Chuck said lightly as Marissa made her way to Kyle for a hug.

"I don't know what you're talking about," Kyle answered truthfully.

"I'm afraid I don't either. This is my husband Kyle Schweitzer."

"No, no. This is Gary Hobson. I should know - I've been friends with his since high school."

"He definitely feels like Gary," Marissa chimed in.

Kyle looked from Charlie to Chuck in a state of bewilderment.

"It's true," Scully said quietly. All turned their eyes to her. "I know that man is Gary Hobson."

"I as well," Mulder added, nodding.

Kyle's eyes grew wide. He shook his head, bewildered.

"This is Kyle Schweitzer," Frank Parker insisted, trying to help the strange situation. "We were buddies back in college."

Charity joined her husband's side. "I've been married to Kyle for seven years. I think I know my own husband."

Silence filled the room. It seemed they were having an unspoken

face-off: Kyle, Charity, and Frank Parker vs. Mulder, Scully, Chuck and Marissa, with Mac, Sam, and Bud off to the side, totally confused.

"This isn't the important thing," Frank announced, breaking the spell. "The important thing is that everyone knows the severity of our situation."

The others nodded, and Frank continued. "Have you all heard of the Many Worlds theory?"

"Yes," Sam, Mac, Mulder, Scully, Bud, Marissa, Kyle and Charity replied in unison.

"No," Chuck admitted.

"Well, it's very simple. For every action, an alternate dimension is created for all of the different outcomes that could have happened. These dimensions are parallel to our own. There is also an infinite number of these parallel universes.

Chuck nodded slightly with a dim light of understanding in his eyes.

"Anyway, some of these worlds have developed technology for traveling between them."

"Yes," Sam said impatiently, already knowing where the short man was going.

"These four people - Quinn Mallory, Wade Wells, Maximilian Arturo, and Rembrandt Brown - are travelers from a different world."

Scully looked like she was going to laugh. Mac looked between Sam and Parker in disbelief. Sam and Mulder had the look of comprehension and understanding in their eyes. Marissa and Chuck raised their eyebrows. Charity just shook her head.

"Cool," Bud whispered, grinning.

On a hunch, Chuck snuck a peak at the headline of the paper. It had changed. A spreading fear engulfed him, and he glanced at Kyle.

"Are we really supposed to believe that, Mr. Parker?" Scully asked.

Frank Parker nodded. "Yes, and please, call me Frank."

But this is what we need to tell you," Kyle said, taking over for his friend. "Our government has obtained the information needed to create this technology. It was being transported on this ship. It was a mere coincidence that these four sliders appeared on the USS Enterprise."

"I don't believe in coincidences," Mulder said firmly.

"Um, anyway, their timer was interfering with the technology being transported."

"So?" Al asked, but only Sam could hear him.

"There were two ambassadors on this ship - a Russian and a Chinese. I killed the Chinese ambassador because I had reason to believe it would stop an invasion. The only thing is - it didn't work. The sliding technology aboard the Enterprise is nowhere to be found, and the equipment the four sliders brought with, a timer, has been stolen. We believe that it was the Russian Ambassador, who could be working for the Kromaggs."

"Has it occurred to you, Kyle," Charity spoke up suddenly, "That maybe the Kromaggs knew ahead of time what was going to happen, because of our 'connection' to them, and instead of posing as just the Chinese they posed as the Russian, too?"

"That's what has taken Frank and I days to realize."

"Days?" Charlie asked, confused. "But you've been with me..."

"No, I haven't," Kyle said, a weird look on his face. "I arrived here on the 17th and met up with Parker at the Base. I was shocked to see you here."

"Then who...?" Charity trailed off.

"Gary!" Chuck exclaimed suddenly. "You must have thought Gary was your husband! They look so much alike, and even sound alike, and Gary's been missing for almost two weeks. He must have been the one you landed on, the one in the hospital you identified as Kyle."

"Then where is he?" Scully asked softly. Everyone looked at Charlie.

"He needed to buy some clothes, and then he was coming here with dinner..."

"Oh my God," Marissa whispered, clutching Chuck's shirt.

"Let's go look for him," Mulder suggested, and everyone concurred. Sam, who was nearest to the door now, opened it only to find a petty officer about to knock.

"Sir?" he saluted, out of breath. Sam saluted back hurriedly.

"What? What happened?"

"It's the prisoners, sir. The four of them... they're gone. It looks like they were taken."

"Taken? By who?" Mac was instantly at Harm's side.

"We don't know, ma'am. Follow me."

The room emptied quickly as they all followed the petty officer to the Brig.

"We've started a search all over the base, sir," The petty officer informed Harm. "If you would want to join in -"

"Show us where to start looking," Mulder said. The officer nodded,



and lead the group outside.

3:32 AM LOCAL TIME

SAN DIEGO NAVAL BASE

FRIDAY, MAY 19

So far, neither Gary Hobson, nor any of the sliders had been found. Everyone was meeting together to decide where to start the off-base search.

"Ziggy found something out for you, Sam," Al chirped in his buddy's ear. "There was a fire tomorrow afternoon in a medical research facility several miles from San Diego. The remains of fifteen bodies were found, along with burned and broken sliding technology."

"My God," Sam whispered under his breath.

"Colonel! Lieutenant!" Sam shouted to the figures ahead of him that were hidden in the early morning mist. "I know where they are!"

On the other side of the base, Marissa, Chuck, Mulder, and Scully were making their way to meet up with the rest of the searchers. As they reached the meeting point, Chuck's eyes were glued to the article under the headline "Fifteen dead in research facility fire."

RESEARCH FACILITY

33535 NELMS DRIVE

SAN DIEGO

Thanks to directions from Al, Sam had managed to drive a borrowed truck containing himself and nine passengers to the research facility in record time.

"I still think we should have told them, you know, gotten back up," Marissa said as Chuck helped her climb out of the truck.

"We need a plan. This place looks pretty big, so we should probably split up to cover more ground," Frank commanded. The others nodded.

Chuck reread the article, but there was no information on where the bodies were found inside.

"Okay, everyone. Meet up here in fifteen minutes, no later," Frank told the group. A chorus of 'yes's and 'sure's was his answer.

Everyone split up, and Mac instantly regretted the decision as she made her way down a dark stairway, hearing her footsteps echo. It smelled musty and she had a bad feeling about this place. Mac shuddered, then scolded herself.

'Suck it up, Marine,' she said quietly, reprimanding herself. 'You've got a job to do.'

But Mac heard a noise and stopped moving, stopped breathing, stopped thinking.

Then she didn't hear anything. "I'm just spooked out," she told herself reassuringly. "There's nobody here."

"Wrong!" a voice said as Mac was hit over the head with the handle of a gun and collapsed onto the cold concrete floor.

RESEARCH FACILITY

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"It's the Russian ambassador. He has Mac," Al announced suddenly in Sam's ear.

"What?" Sam asked, his voice echoing down the empty, abandoned hallway.

"Mac, Gary, and the sliders were kidnapped by Globenshav. Hurry, get the others. I can direct you to where they are."

Amazingly, the fifteen minutes were up when Sam made it back to the meeting point. Everyone but Mac was present. He told them what had happened and no one questioned how he had gotten his information.

"What are we going to do?" Chuck asked.

"Shh," Sam insisted, but their cover was already blown.

"Wow. Quite an army you got there, Commander," Globenshav said. All eight spun around.

"Let her go, Globenshav," Sam demanded, taking a step forward, away from the group. The Russian laughed.

"Yeah, right. Give me what I need and I might consider it."

"What do you need?" Mulder asked, taking a step forward, now even with Sam.

"You know what I'm talking about. Do not pretend to be playing dumb. Give me the timer and the other sliding technology."

Sam looked at Mulder, Mulder looked at Sam, and they both turned to the others. They all looked thoroughly confused.

"You mean, you don't have the timer?" Charlie asked.

"Me? Of course not, you fool. Why would I ask you for something I had?"

"If you don't have it, then who does?" Scully asked him. He shrugged.

"I thought you did. I know that Cho stole it, but then he was killed. You did not murder him?" the Russian asked the group. They shook

their heads, deciding to save Kyle from the Russian's wrath.

"You lie!" he bellowed, and flipped on a light switch. Six figures were illuminated behind him - The four sliders were gagged and tied to chairs, as was an unconscious Gary Hobson. Mac was sprawled, limp, on the floor at their feet. Globenshav walked over and yanked Mac up from her position on the ground. She shook her head, regaining consciousness and trying to grasp the situation she was in. "You are all liars, and unless you tell me the truth they will die, and she will be first!"

Sam's heart lurched. He could tell his host really loved her as residual emotions flooded his brain.

Suddenly, a gunshot rang out. Globenshav let go of Mac and pulled the trigger of his gun before he fell.

Everything went slowly. The bullet from Globenshav's gun traveled directly into Sam's chest. Sam collapsed ever-so-slowly into a heap of limp limbs and crimson blood.

"NO!" Mac shouted, running shakily to her fallen friend. Bud also rushed to his side, his face ashen.

"Oh my god! SAM!" Al yelled, appearing suddenly at his side.

"Let me through, I'm a doctor," Scully instructed, gently pushing Bud away but allowing Mac to stay and hold his hand.

"Someone call 911!" Scully shouted, but Mulder was already on his cell phone with the paramedics.

A man appeared beside the group and his eyes widened at the sight of the fallen Commander.

"Frank?!? How did you do that?" Kyle asked.

"Let's just say I've gotten very good at marksmanship." He turned to Scully. "Is it bad?"

Scully only grunted a reply; she was concentrating too hard on the victim.

"Um, Scully," Mulder said quietly, squatting down next to her with his cell phone in his hand. "The phone's not working."

"Great," Bud cried, turning away from the scene.

Mac blinked her eyes and stared at Sam.

"Who're you?" she asked. "Where's Harm?"

Scully, along with the others, stared at her.

"That's not Harm," she insisted. Bud turned around and stared at her in confusion.

Sam moaned weakly, and gazed up at Mac.

"I'm Sam Beckett," he mumbled as blood started leaking from his

mouth.

Mac looked confused, then caught sight of Al.

"Who're you...?" she asked, squinting at the insignia on Al's dress whites. "Admiral?"

"Admiral Calavicci at your service," Al said slowly. "She must have a concussion, Ziggy." Al paused. "How's Sam doing?"

Al looked down at his friend squirting blood out of his mouth and tears started falling.

"Oh no, Sam. God no! You are not dying on me, buddy!" he knelt beside him and tried to slap his face. It was useless; his hand went right through Sam's closed eyes and blood-streaked cheeks.

"Are you a ghost?" Mac asked, staring at Al in amazement.

"No, a hologram. Are the paramedics here?"

The group was silent as they listened to Mac seemingly talking to herself, Scully working frantically, and the Commander gurgling blood.

Chuck, Kyle, and Charlie had turned to untie all of the captives. That's when the sound of a gun cocking echoed through the room. Everyone froze except for Scully, who seemed to not even hear it.

"Hello, Mulder," a voice called out. Mulder stood and spun in one fluid motion. His face registered his shock at who he was seeing.

The man laughed and puffed on his glowing cigarette.

Everyone, minus Scully, Sam, Mac, and Gary, who was still unconscious, turned to face this new enemy.

"You're a bright boy, Fox," the man said. "Then again, you always were. I assume you have an idea of what is going on here."

Mulder stared across the twenty or so feet between them, his face a cold mask.

"You want us all to die," he said quietly. "That's why my phone's not working." he paused. "But we're not going to die."

"Really?" The Cigarette-Smoking Man said coyly, taking a few steps toward Mulder and the rest of the group. The gun was pointed straight at Mulder's head.

"Really. And there isn't going to be an invasion, either."

"Now you're treading on thin ice, Fox." The man took one last puff and dropped the cigarette to the floor.

A line of bright orange flame shot out behind him, and before anyone could do anything about it, half of the facility was engulfed in flames.

"What is going on?" Kyle demanded, walking up next to Mulder despite Charlie's silent protests.

"Ah, Kyle. You know more than you're letting on. C'mon now, tell everyone before they die. Tell them how you're not who they think you are, tell them how you betrayed them, tell them how the invasion will still go as planned. Go ahead, tell them how you destroyed the human race."

With every accusation, Kyle took a step away from the group. Everyone was stunned. Frank was hugging a crying Charity.

"This is not how it was supposed to happen," Kyle insisted, pleading with the group. "You don't understand -"

"Oh no," Charlie said angrily, turning to face the man she thought was her husband. "I understand perfectly."

She covered the few feet between them in a few quick steps, and slapped him across the face before he had a chance to react.

The Cigarette-Smoking Man laughed. The fire behind him made him look even more sinister, even more devilish.

"Now, now, dear Charlie," he started. Suddenly, he transformed right in front of their eyes into the most grotesque creature any of them, excluding Quinn, Rembrandt, Wade, and the Professor, had seen.

"You wouldn't believe this," Chuck whispered to Marissa, who was cradling the fallen Gary.

"Don't think in your last moments alive that there was something you could have done to prevent the invasion," the equally grotesque voice boomed over the cackle of the spreading flames.

"C'mon, Harm. Don't you die on me," Scully insisted to the bleeding body in front of her. She performed rescue breathing again and took his pulse. The body began to convulse.

"I'm losing him!" she shouted, working quickly, frantically.

A blue-white light engulfed the body of Harmon Rabb, Jr.. The bleeding slowed and stopped, and blue-green eyes opened slowly.

"What happened?" Harm asked quietly. Mac gave a cry of joy and reached down to squeeze him tight.

Al looked around and pounded on his handlink. "Where's Sam?" he asked Ziggy.

"I'm right here," Sam whispered. Al spun around.

"Oh my God, Sam. You leaped into Quinn? What the hell just happened?"

"I don't know," Sam whispered under his breath. No one but Al heard him.

"Ziggy's going nuts!" Al said excitedly. "I can't believe it!"

"What just happened?" Scully asked.

"I don't know," Harm answered, trying to sit up while still in Mac's embrace.

The roof across the room collapsed suddenly. Flames reached high into the dark early-morning sky.

"We have to get out of here!" Bud shouted. The Kromagg shook his head.

"I don't think so. Everyone is staying right here," he pulled out a device from his pocket and started to press buttons. "You all get to witness the call that is responsible for the destruction of humanity. Very exciting, isn't it?"

The group huddled together. Kyle remained a few feet off to the side.

Suddenly, a blue-green wormhole appeared a dozen feet from the Kromagg. A round of bullets right into his chest was followed by the appearance of a figure.

"Kyle?" Charity asked, taking a step forward.

"Charlie!" The real Kyle Schweitzer ran to his wife and hugged her with all his might. "I never thought I'd see you again!"

Their reunion was interrupted by a sound coming from the fallen Kromagg.

"Your little bullets cannot stop me," It said, coming back to its feet. Everyone huddled together and slowly backed away from the creature. Bud helped Chuck support the still unconscious Gary.

"The building is going to collapse!" Al warned. Sam nodded.

"We have to get out of here," Sam announced to the group, even though it was unnecessary.

"Stop! Do not move!" the Kromagg screamed. He picked up the gun he had been holding earlier. "Move and I will fire!"

They sensed it before it actually happened. The fire had engulfed the entire ceiling, and a collection of large beams covered in flame fell suddenly from what was left of the ceiling. Everyone unconsciously backed up, their eyes skyward. The Kromagg screamed at them and managed to fire the gun once before the boards fell right on top of him, killing him instantly.

The bullet whizzed through the smokey air and penetrated Gary's shoulder. Bud and Chuck, caught off guard, lost their grip and Gary collapsed to the floor, hitting his head with a sickening smack that was heard over the roar of the flames.

"Gary!" Chuck exclaimed, and knelt down to his friend.

Spike barked suddenly, and the others looked up to see the structure

above them ready to fall.

"Let's get out of here!" someone shouted. Quinn, Rembrandt, and the Professor helped Bud and Chuck carry Gary's bleeding and unconscious body out to safety.

They laid Gary in the back of the truck and everyone carefully piled in. Mulder hopped in the driver's seat and drove the crowded vehicle a safe distance from the erupting inferno. He noticed the truck's radio, and gleefully called the Base, telling them their location and that they needed to send an ambulance, ASAP.

Only Scully, Gary, Chuck, Marissa, and Spike were in the back now. The others were in a circle around them, watching the proceedings with dreadful anticipation.

Scully was still working furiously when the paramedics arrived only ten minutes later.

"He's not out of the woods yet," Scully informed everyone as they loaded Gary into the ambulance. "But I think he's going to be okay."

Marissa and Chuck sighed in relief. Mulder almost smiled. Scully sighed.

"I think you should all go to the hospital to get checked out," a paramedic told them sternly. They all nodded, exhausted, and piled into various vehicles.

6:30 AM LOCAL TIME

SAN DIEGO HOSPITAL

SUNDAY, MAY 21

Dana Scully yawned. She stood and stretched in the almost empty hospital hallway. She almost laughed; the entire hallway belonged to everyone involved in the warehouse incident.

She made it across to the empty nurses' station and poured herself a cup of coffee. She greedily gulped down the precious black liquid.

In the empty hallway she stretched and yawned again, before taking a step to her right.

Meow. Thump.

Scully stopped dead in her tracks and stared down at her feet.

"What the-?" she asked sleepily.

An orange and white tabby cat stared up her, blinking.

Scully slowly bent down to see if the cat had an ID.

"How'd you get in here?" she asked quietly, then stopped again when she noticed a copy of the Chicago Sun-Times under the feline.

She gently yanked the paper out from under the cat and stood up.

"This is weird," she thought to herself. "This has to be yesterday's. They don't deliver to hospitals this early."

She checked the date and gasped.

"Monday, May 22nd?" she whispered in disbelief, and looked at the headline.

"Floods causing problems for farmers."

Suddenly, the door in front of her opened and a hospital gown-clad Gary Hobson emerged. The tabby darted inside the room and Scully stared at Gary, whose eyes grew wide with realization. It had, miraculously, all come back to him. He was indeed Gary Hobson, a Chicagoan, a bar owner, a hero with a secret - a secret that was about to be found out.

"No, no, no, no, no," Gary mumbled the mantra quietly.

"Um, Mr., uh, Hobson?"

"Gary." he corrected automatically.

"Gary?"

"Yes?" he asked dejectedly.

"Is this your paper?"

He nodded, eying the Sun-Times in her hands.

"Um, would you, uh, care to explain to me why it is tomorrow's paper?"

"Well," Gary laughed nervously, then stopped when he realized there was no way out. "You better come inside."

Gary followed Agent Scully into his room feeling like a child walking into the principal's office.

1:39 PM LOCAL TIME

PATRICK'S DINER

SAN DIEGO

MONDAY, MAY 22

Everyone was sitting around a large rectangular table, enjoying lunch. They had all been released from the hospital the night before or early that morning. All of the doctors were baffled at Harm's recovery. Gary was proclaimed a miracle by every doctor at the hospital: as soon as he woke up after surgery, the memories of his life as Gary Hobson came back to him, and the bullet had seemed to do little damage. Wade, the Professor, and Rembrandt had begun to suspect something was wrong with Quinn. Mulder was busily trying to figure out his "flight of fancy" case and Scully was in denial about



both the case and Gary's paper. Chuck was switching off between staring at Scully and staring at Mac. Marissa was glad, as deep down Chuck was too, to have Gary back to normal. Charlie and Kyle, meanwhile, were finding strength in their togetherness and were quietly talking to each other. The Bad Kyle had disappeared shortly after everyone had arrived at the hospital.

"I'm still confused," Harm announced.

"Well, what's the last thing you remember?" Mulder asked.

"The last thing I remember," Harm said, thinking hard. "I was talking to Mac in my hotel room."

"You don't remember anything after that?" Mac asked, surprised.

"No. That's the last thing I remember... wait. I do remember... being in a bright blue room. A brightly-dressed man came to talk to me, and then I saw him a bit later wearing his dress whites."

"Admiral Calavicci!" Mac said suddenly. "I saw him, too! He said it was because of my concussion."

Scully stared at both of them. "What are you saying?"

"I think," Mulder started, grinning. "I think they are talking about a bright blue room, far away voices, glowing cubes, a funnily-dressed angel, and being contained in a different body. In other words, the case I was just starting to investigate before we got this one."

"I don't understand," Chuck spoke up. "What are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about an experience that you, too, witnessed, Chuck. Do you remember when Scully and I first met you?"

Chuck nodded.

"Did you notice anything weird about your friend Gary?"

Chuck glanced at Gary before turning back to Mulder.

"Yes. He seemed... different. Not much, but enough."

"And Gary, do you remember your trip to DC with Chuck?"

"Well, uh," Gary paused, his voice was still hoarse and it was an effort to talk. "Uh, no. I, uh, I do remember going on the plane. Then my memory's hazy. The next thing I remember is being in a diner with you and Ms. Scully and Chuck staring at me."

"See? And this happened again with Harm. That makes six cases, Scully. Six identical experiences. Were you able to pinpoint the exact change, Chuck?"

Chuck nodded. "On the plane. I asked him a question and he stopped before he answered. It was like he had just appeared."

"And what about you, Colonel? Did you notice an exact point?"

She nodded, the trace of a blush apparent on her face.

"I asked him a question, and he... he didn't know how to answer it."

"What question?" Harm asked, trying desperately to remember.

"I'll tell you later," Mac whispered.

"Sam, I'll be back, okay?" Al said suddenly. Sam looked at him, worried.

"Don't worry. They won't figure out it's you." With that, Al disappeared.

The sliders were all fidgety.

"When is he going to be here?" Wade asked for the millionth time.

"Calm down, Wade," Sam said soothingly. "Frank'll be here soon with our timer.

"Hey Sam," Al appeared suddenly and made his pal jump. "You'll never guess what's happened!"

Sam's look asked Al, "What?".

"Quinn Mallory has been talking with Ziggy, and they've found a way to not only better control your leaps, but they believe they found a way to get you home!"

Sam froze, shock evident on his face. His questioning look caused Al to motion to the bathroom.

"Excuse me," he said, standing. "Have to use the restroom."

He practically ran to the men's room and asked Al, "Really?"

Al nodded and Sam beamed.

"Yes, and not only that, but Ziggy helped Quinn figure out how to get back to his world."

"This is great! Maybe that's why I kept leaping into this timeframe! I was just waiting for Quinn Mallory to arrive on this world!" he exclaimed, walking into a stall.

Mulder entered the room, unnoticed, and went to the stall next to Sam's.

"So, Al, what are the odds that I'll get back home?"

"Well," Al said, pulling out an unlit cigar. "Ziggy can't get any odds on this one, Sam."

"Why not?"

"We're not sure. But, Sam, I have to ask you two things."

"Okay."

"Will you continue to leap when we get you back?"

Sam was unsure.

"I don't know, Al. Leaping has been such an important part of my life. I can't even imagine not swapping bodies and saving someone, or righting what once went wrong. But the original goal of Project Quantum Leap was to observe, was it not? And yet, I can't picture just observing the past now."

"All right," Al said, then grew solemn. "There is a chance that we might lose you forever."

Sam had a look of shock and fear in his eyes. Al made himself stare into them as he asked his next question.

"Are you willing to risk it?"

Sam only thought momentarily about the little things he could remember about his life, but it hadn't been his life in so long.

He stared squarely at Al.

"I'm willing to risk it."

"Then good. I'll talk to you soon. I'm going to go check on Quinn."

"Okay. Bye, Al. And tell Quinn thank you."

Al punched a few buttons on his handlink and a door appeared.

"I already have, Sam," he told him as he stepped through.

Sam took a deep breath and left the stall. He went to wash his hands but instead just leaned against the wall in shock.

"Home?" he whispered, his voice hoarse. "I just want to get back home."

Mulder slowly walked out of his stall and stared at Sam.

"Who ARE you?" he asked the Leaper quietly.

"I'm Sam Beckett, and I'm going home," Sam replied jovially, and left a confused Mulder standing in the bathroom.

When Sam returned to his seat, he noticed that Frank had just arrived. Mulder appeared at the table shortly after, and Frank got down to business.

The NSA agent reached into his pocket and pulled out the timer. The sliders gasped.

"Thank goodness," Wade exclaimed.

"How long do we have?"

"Three hours," Frank informed them as he gave the timer to the Professor.

"I have to thank you all for your help at the uh, research building. In all the confusion, I kind of forgot to mention that I had taken the timer, and the other sliding technology."

"Well, nobody blames you," Rembrandt said with a slight smile on his lips. "That was some experience."

Everyone nodded. It had been such an experience that they all had made a pact not to ever mention it again. None of them really felt up to questioning the whirlwind of events that had happened over the past few days anyway.

"Well, it was nice meeting all of you," Frank said, standing. "I have a flight to catch, and I know everyone else does." Everyone stood and shook hands. Some hugs were exchanged. Pretty soon, the table was cleared except for Scully, Gary, Chuck, and Marissa.

Scully sat at the table and stared across at Gary, Chuck, and Marissa.

"I just don't..." she started. "I mean, how can..." she tried again. "It isn't scientifically possible," she finally managed.

The three best friends sighed in unison. They had grown impatient with the female federal agent.

"Who said anything about science?" Chuck wanted to know.

"But everything is science-related. Science proves... everything," Scully defended numbly.

"Well, there is no scientific explanation for this, Ms. Scully." Gary lowered his voice. "I get tomorrow's paper today and a cat to boot."

Chuck, Gary, and Marissa stood to leave. Scully just sat, staring at them thoughtfully.

"But, it's impossible," she mumbled. Gary and Chuck looked at each other and rolled their eyes.

## EPILOGUE

4:33 PM LOCAL TIME

SAN DIEGO AIRPORT

SATURDAY, MAY 20

"Mac, about what I said at the office before we left," Harm said nervously. He, Mac, Bud, Mulder, Scully, Gary, Chuck, and Marissa were sitting in the airport waiting for their flights; Frank had already left. Harm had been contemplating talking to Mac for the duration of their forty-five minute wait.

Mac looked up from the magazine she was browsing through and searched

Harm's green eyes.

"We'll talk when we get back to Virginia," she said decisively. Harm nodded, satisfied. He hoped she would tell him what the question was that she had asked him just before... his memory failed.

Bud joined them. He had been on the phone with Harriet.

"Harriet and Baby AJ say 'hi'," Bud said, sitting down next to Harm. They smiled at him, fighting the urge not to laugh.

Two rows over Mulder was mulling over a case folder opened on his lap. He had, after a lot of thinking, decided not to mention anything about Sam Beckett to anyone. Not that they would believe him.

Scully was sitting next to him. She had been staring at the Monday edition of the Chicago Sun-Times for close to twenty minutes. As a sort of thank-you gift, Gary had bought it for her earlier in their wait. He hoped she had a sense of humor. Maybe she would find it funny later, but right then her belief system was a jumbled mess.

Gary, Chuck, and Marissa were sitting behind Mulder and Scully, quietly discussing the events that had happened since Gary's disappearance.

Meanwhile, outside of the airport, all six sliders were waiting for their timers to count down. There were only seconds left.

"So, are you guys going to join the resistance?" Kyle asked, hugging his wife to him.

The Professor, Wade, and Rembrandt looked at each other, then at Sam.

"There'll be time for all that," Sam said prophetically. A huge smile spread across his face.

"First, we're going home."

He hit the button on the timer, Kyle hit his button, and two wormholes appeared - one blue-white, and the other blue-green. Before Sam jumped through, a blue-white light engulfed his body, and for the first time in years, Sam Leaped into his own time, in his own body.

He had made it home.

THE END

End  
file.